

Book Review

Ambiguities and Tensions in English Language Teaching: Portraits of EFL Teachers as Legitimate Speaker

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Using post structural approach, this book explores the three EFL teachers' experience in Oaxaca, Mexico named Carlos, Rocio and Hilario. All of three teachers gained undergraduate degree in TESOL from the local university. At the time of research, the three teachers had three year teaching experience (Sayer, 2012). The major themes of the book are *tensions* and *contradictions* experienced by those three teachers in the effort of performing their identities in their profession toward US-English Ideology (Sayer, 2012). *Legitimacy, symbolic competence and performativity* are of the central themes where Carlos, Rocio and Hilario went through struggles before getting their first teaching experience (Sayer, 2012). Native speakerism, race discrimination and the necessity to have '*payala*' (connection) in teacher union are the hurdles during process of job-seeking. In addition to teaching objectives from the ministry of education, emigration to North America and the historical relation between Mexico and US mark the teaching process in the classroom (Sayer, 2012). More detail elaborations are given in the following paragraphs designating eight chapters.

Chapter I (Exploring the contradiction of Language Teaching) set the scene for the entire content through exploration of key questions which the book aims to answer such as the reasons for teaching English in Tlaxcaltepec in Mexico, the main theoretical approach used, brief background of Oaxaca including its historical and political situations which shape the English language ideologies formation among the focal teachers as well as teacher union. The three teachers had to experience the effect of serious social conflicts between Institutional Revolutionary Party (IRP) which ruled for 80 years vis a vis the 'coalition of Leftist social groups' in June 2006 and its immediate effects (p.8). However, three focal teachers have their differing views. Carlos was not in support of the movement as it would not be conducive for their family's 'pottery workshop' selling the products to 'tourist

market'. Hilario was ambivalent as despite his criticism over 'corrupt' and 'selfish' characters of teacher union; he still applied position in it. Rocio most strikingly was involved in the movement against the government policy on the 'globalization and privatization of public education' (p.11).

Chapter II (Tree English Teachers) touches the three focal teachers' portrait of personal and educational trajectories. The author evocatively describes teachers through Creative Non Fiction (CNF) writing style. This introduction of teachers' personal and educational histories served the background for tensions and ambiguities, the major theme of the book. All of three focal teachers did undergraduate degrees in TESOL at a local university.

Carlos, since his teenage time had been hypnotized by the US portrayals on TV programs but concurrently joined the 'a local folkloric dance group' (p.20). Another social engagement was shown in Carlos' commitment through his two year service as policeman for the community. Carlos had an unpleasant experience teaching at a language centre where he did bachelor because the students did not like his biological trait (Moreno, dark skinned) and his lack of teaching experience. As a result he was employed only for a day. He then moved 'up there', Chicago as an illegal worker, under the help of *Coyote*, he crossed Mexico to Chicago miserably. Despite confronting mismatch of the reality with his former aim to interact more with Gringo (North American Native Speaker), he gained one benefit, being more confident when coming back to Oaxaca and his subsequent teaching profession.

Rocio, after graduating from her Bachelor degree, had to face hard struggles joining the teacher union. Her father took the benefit of the familial relationship to get Rocio in the union. Rocio was accepted in the union but housed at a rural area. After feeling unenjoyment staying in the rural village, it finally turned out that Rocio felt that teaching in the area had a valuable life for her despite the fact that she needed to commute to the city in the weekend to meet her family. Rocio was the only one out of the three teachers who hadn't had experience of visiting US.

Hilario, after graduation, had experience applying a teacher position a new school where his friend's girlfriend served as the manager. He was discriminated because the school prefer native speaker teachers. However, Hilario at the end notice that one of his TESOL classmates Pablo was accepted in the position as no native speaker took the position. Pablo, as he reckoned, had more native like pronunciation and had a lighter skin. Hilario

then spent several years with his father. Motivated to improve his accent and gain money for his future marriage with his girlfriend, Hilario accepted his uncle's invitation to go to Florida to work at "a building material supply warehouse" (p.31) to drive a forklift. After few months of working with no socialization with native speaker, he moved to Chicago to Carlos' accommodation. But Hilario didn't get a job in Chicago and finally decided to get back to Oaxaca. Getting back in Oaxaca, Hilario started teaching at Salesian School where he taught in limited paid hours with voluntary teaching. As the time went by, his salary increased and he also started his own private course.

Chapter III (Squeezing more juice) provides more detailed account of the places where the teachers taught, classroom situation and the English levels.

Carlos taught in the City at the Universidad del Altozano, a private university with 18 campuses. Moreover, Carlos also worked at the language centre where he used to be fired off. Getting back from Chicago boosted Carlo's confidence in teaching English English this time. Students also appreciated his undocumented experience in Chicago. He taught more communicatively and engaged with students. He had a chance to discuss soccer team, commenting on the uncleaned board on programming language etc. Carlos also maintained a good rapport with students outside the classroom through chatting about pirate CDs. Carlos' teaching was on grammar and basic level of English despite the fact that he was teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class.

Unlike Carlos, Rocio taught in two different places, English in the village in Chinantela and weekend teaching position in the language centre in the city. Teaching in secundaria school, Rocio should rent 'unfinished cinderblock house' (p.53), where kitchen and plumbing were unavailable. Rocio needed to adjust her teaching time especially when there was 'APPO Movement' against the governor's policy. Many of the students' parents on the other hand did not like teachers' involvement in the movement as the parents thought that teachers gained 'high wages' with 'lots of time off' (p.53). Rocio did the classroom instruction in English classroom in Spanish. In the classroom, she taught guided dialogues, where the students had the chance to order the jumbled expression likes and dislikes, comparative and superlative forms. Rocio had returnee students from US and took benefit of this by making them as her assistant in the classroom. What made frustrating for Rocio was that some of the returnee's brother (who just came back from US) wished to join the Rocio's class and wanted to show off their English.

Rocio welcomed the challenge and showed her capacity in teaching. She never taught students cultural comparisons between US and Mexico.

Hilario was teaching in the religious boarding school belonging to Catholic order in Matagallinas, a small village. The three core values emphasized in the school were “kindness, reason and religion” (p.64). Hilario created his own lesson plan and teaching materials. He taught dictation, grammar, comparative and superlative forms. One of interesting thing in his class was that one of his male students flirted the female student. Hillario was afraid that this as other kids will know this and this love would affect the students’ academic achievement. Other unique things from Hillario’s class, when he was teaching superlative form, one student mocked his father through the example by saying “my fucking father (the biggest asshole...)” (p.68) while another student asked the superlative form of the word ‘gay’. This showed that some students’ example was socially situated. Hillario had no problems with these.

Chapter IV (Legitimacy, symbolic competence and teaching English) deals more with the conceptual framework used to discuss the issue of ambiguities and tensions in foreign language teaching. This chapter discusses *sociocultural approach, language practices as socially situated, identity, performativity, legitimacy, and symbolic competence*. The sociocultural approach is used as it is deemed appropriate to see that individual’s capacity to involve in the meaning making process is constrained by political and historical aspect (Luk and Lin, 2007 cited Sayer, 2012). Three focal teachers teaching *practices are situated* within their own teaching context e.g. Rocio’s teaching is integrated to remote village, Hillario’s class is bound to religious boarding school in Matagallinas whereas Carlos’ teaching in the morning and the evening classes in different schools. *As for identity*, the author argues that the three focal teachers may perform three different positions as language learner, language user and language user. What made different among the three is ‘different sort of engagement’ (p.85), which reflects teachers’ role and identities within specific moment. E.g. Hilario’s use of “Good morning class” marks his teacher role and identity as an English teacher. It has been socio-culturally constructed. Furthermore the author based identity discussion on (Norton, 2006 and Block, 2007 cited in Sayer 2012). He summarized both of the scholars’ identity as dynamic and constantly changing across time and space, identities are performed and constructed through language, are constitutive of and constituted by larger social processes. Furthermore, Identity is considered complex, non-unitary, contradictory and multi-faceted, it is site of struggle and finally identities are

performed and (may-be) constructed in language classrooms (as a site of identity construction) (pp.: 86-87).

In the *performativity* part, the author based his discussion and analysis based on the idea of performativity put forward by Butler (2000) & Pennycook (2004) (cited in Sayer, 2012). These scholars accordingly regard identity as *performances* repeated overtime and must be performed continually to be maintained. Related to performativity, *legitimacy* is also performed rather than static and stable concept. Carlos gained his legitimacy of teaching English among his students was because his experience of short stay in Chicago. Rocio's legitimacy was strengthened because she was brave to take the challenges by the returnee's brother that she was able to teach English even though she had not visited US. Legitimacy in the above case includes the idea who is 'authorized to speak' (Heller, 1996 cited in Sayer, 2012) and 'whether or not others recognize you as English speaker' (p.91). In discussing the idea of *symbolic competence*, the author follows Kramsch & Whiteside (2008 cited in Sayer 2012) four characteristics; subjectivity and subject positioning, historicity, performativity and re-framing. The author used Kramsch's (2009) definition of *symbolic competence* as 'away of capturing a multilingual power to shape her reality through and across her languages' (cited in Sayer, 2012, p.95). The *symbolic competence* is associated with the ability to use 'different linguistic codes' to represent the world both through 'declarative' and 'performative power'. In terms of English teachers in Mexico, the symbolic competence is often associated with native accent and the experience of living in the US.

Chapter V (So they can defend themselves little: The meanings and contradictions of teaching English). This chapter illustrates the meaning of English language teaching (ELT) in Oaxaca context. The ELT was basically done to prepare students migrate to the US in the future. It was prevailing discourse and parts of life in Oaxacan society that most of them migrate to the US for particular periods then going back to Oaxaca with big amount of money. So the teaching of English was to help students, as Hilario commented, to 'defend themselves little'. There are four contradictions experienced by three focal teachers. The *first contradiction* was that English taught to students may be meaningless for the students who were not going to the US so 'English doesn't help that much after all' (p.107). The teachers, especially Hilario was in dilemma either teachings US variety of English as the general 'symbolic capital' or teaching English variety which aligned with students' sociocultural context. The *second contradiction* was the teachers' opinion that teaching of English was important but on the other hand, the

teachers were worried about the government's plan to 'expand English language education' would result in facilitating the government to 'sell Mexico' to foreign investors especially US on Mexican oil and gas. The *third contradiction* was 63 % of teachers in Oaxaca believed that teaching English entailed the teaching of culture. The students' activities in the classroom such as dialogue and role plays showed a distant relationship with history and culture of English. The *last contradiction* was, as existed in Hilario's case, he believed that teaching culture would 'validate the students' cultural heritage' (p.121) but he was in dilemma of presenting the 'the material wealth of US' above Oaxaca.

Chapter VI (Hey Take it Easy: Ambivalence and Language Ideologies)

This chapter describes language ideologies embedded in *language hierarchy in Oaxaca, the US-English ideology, Pocho-Ideology, the ideology of native speakerism and ambivalence on dominant language ideologies*. As implied, US English ideology was pervasive in the life of Oaxacan people. The US ideology can be seen from TV programs, music, dolls, football which was identical to US. The term *pocho-ideology* is used to refer to the returnees of Oaxacan people from the US. They performed American like identities shown from their dress and the US English they spoke. However, their language was mixed of English and Spanish (Mexican, local languages). The ironic example was the boy who met Carlos at the soccer field showing his English by saying "Hey take it easy, what's the problem" which accordingly was the inappropriate use of the expression. In Oaxaca there was *hierarchical relationship* among languages existing in the society. English and Spanish were 'privileged over dialects' (p.136) whereas for the indigenous languages there were also hierarchies among "three to eight varieties of Mixe" (p.136) for example the varieties used in highland and in town had higher status than lowland and the villages' varieties. It was also found that "Zapotec and Mixteco groups also subjugated other neighbours" (Barabas & Bartolome 1999 cited in Sayer, 2012, p.136). The issue of language hierarchies also posed challenges for language curriculum designers to develop "indigenous-language materials and curricula" (p.136). *Native speakerism ideology* had resulted in the discrimination of hiring English teachers and the valorisation of its fluency and accent accorded to US English. The mentioned language ideologies served as the background of the ELT atmosphere in Oaxaca and the determinant factors of conditions which give rise to which *legitimate language* and *who the legitimate speaker is* (Bordieu 1991 cited in Sayer, 2012). English has high status in Oaxaca and serves as the "communicative function" in the interaction with foreigners in Oaxaca. However it was

sometime also seen as “presumptuous” and “acts” of “showing up” (p.159).

Chapter VII (I lasted on day then I was gone: Performing legitimacy)

This chapter is illuminating in that it three focal teachers struggled to *perform legitimacy*, ‘asserting their right to teach’ (p.161). The three teachers as explained had to confront unpleasant experience. Carlos in his first day of teaching was nervous and finally moved out from the language centre as the students favoured native speaker and or experienced teachers. Hilario was rejected when applying a teacher position in secondary school as the school preferred native speaker but finally hired Pablo, Hilario’s classmate due to his lighter skin and better “fluency” and “accent”. While Rocio was challenged by the returnee’s siblings who wanted to join her class just to show off their English. All these relate to the status of the three teachers’ challenges in their profession. Their legitimacy of teachers was questioned. Having analysed the ethnographic data of the three teachers especially in their effort in gaining legitimate status as the teachers of English, the author argued that legitimate speaker as not “fixed, easily recognizable, and agreed-upon figure” as proposed by Bourdieu (1991 cited in Sayer 2012, p.166) but rather *what counts as legitimate speaker* is ‘an ideological construction that is fluid and highly contested’ (p.166). It challenged the dichotomy category that native speaker as the legitimate speaker and non-native speaker as impostors. The most interesting credit in this part is that two strategies described by the author in order for teachers to be legitimate speakers. The first strategy is to mimic the native speaker in terms of accent and fluency, the idea originating from Bhabha’s (1994 cited in Sayer, 2012) idea. However, as Rocio noted the Mexican teachers could only approximate the US English and could never be native speakers. Rocio also told the fact that the students in her classroom wanted to speak like the returnee students who have gained particular features of *gringo*, north-American native speakers. While mimicry might not work for the Mexicans do not have light skin, not ‘*guero enough*’, in the case of Hilario, the author suggested the *second strategy* through the performance of post-colonial accent. The performance of post-colonial accent was inspired from the previous work done by Clemente and Higgins (2008 cited in Sayer 2012, p.174). In this strategy, the EFL teachers ‘recontextualize the notion of legitimacy in their own identity position’ (p.174). This strategy was best associated with Rocio in her classroom teaching especially when students asked Rocio whether or not she had an experience of visiting US. Rocio answered to her students that she had no experience which the students did not expect. The fact that students wondered about Rocio’s capacity to speak English despite her absent

experience to US was the critical moment for Rocio to convince the students that being able to speak English does not necessitate someone to go 'up there' (US). In this context, the second strategy worked for her. This second strategy is more appropriate for EFL teachers, as it does not necessitate biological trait as in the case of Hilario so that legitimacy is gained and contested through one's endeavour.

Chapter VIII (Conclusions: Re-legitimizing through tensions and ambiguities)

In the conclusion part, the author summarized the former findings and discussions in the former chapters as well as underlined those tensions and ambiguities are typical for EFL teachers especially where social and political factors such as the bilateral relationship between US and Mexico (which was metaphorically described as Catholic marriage) played a role. There was ups and down of the relationship between both countries but they would not get separated. Another good point for the book is that, drawing on the previous literature, the author suggested Critical Language Awareness (CLA) written by Reagan (2006 cited in Sayer, 2012) and Language Socialization (LS) of the immigrant L2 learning context (Kramsch, 2002; Duff, 2002 cited in Sayer 2012). CLA was a way to foreground social and political awareness when learning foreign language (Reagan 1986 cited in Sayer, 2012) so that accordingly CLA would enable teachers to more successful cross cultural engagement. LS was beneficial to understand 'ideological process' of the 'intermeshing of ideas and beliefs' (Garret and Baguedano-Lopez, 2002 cited in Sayer, 2012, p.190) the author argued that LS can be 'fruitful to re-envision the teacher's struggle to position themselves as legitimate speakers' (p.190) by integrating CLA in it. In supporting the author, I would suggest that student teachers should be introduced about Post Method Pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), context sensitive pedagogy which promotes particularity, practicality and possibility. Particularity requires teaching to account for sociocultural aspects. Practicality suggests the need for teachers to be able to generate their own teaching theory based on their teaching practice as well as to practice their own theory. Possibility provides the space for EFL teachers to scrutinize ELT from socio-political aspects (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Furthermore, I would also suggest that universities hosting ELT program could adopt Lin's, Wang's, Akamatsu's and Rizai's (2002) call to reorient Teaching English to Speaker of 'Other' Languages (TESOL) to Teaching English as Globalized Communication (TEGCOM). In TESOL paradigm, the imperialism prevails and indicated in the phrase "Other Languages" (Shin, 2006) while TEGCOM paradigm offers critical

dialogic space between what's so claimed as the 'global' English discourse and with the local. In this regard, EFL teachers could be potentially more informed, knowledgeable and empowered to stand strongly in their professions.

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